

150th Anniversary

Sunday, July 20, 2008

Pastor Nick Fisher-Broin

“From Jerusalem to the Ends of the Earth”

Luke 24:44-53

Grace to you and Peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen

On the seacoast of the little fishing village in Karlshamn, Sweden, a statue stands of a fictional couple named Karl Oskar and Kristina. They are characters in a novel by Vilhelm Moberg titled Emigrants, Unto a Good Land. What is striking about the statue of this couple is that Karl Oskar is looking out over the sea—to the new land to which adventure and new opportunities for life are calling him—and Kristina is looking back over her shoulder to her home in Ljuder parish.

Now, from our vantage point in history, we might be tempted to cheer on Karl Oskar’s spirit of adventure and wonder sadly at Kristina’s backwards glance. But then most of us have never had to say goodbye to loved ones, knowing that we would never see them again for a lifetime. Kristina’s glance back at home instead, is a tender realization that in leaving home, there is much that is left behind.

And yet, from many lands, Karls and Kristinas lived through this same moment as they turned their faces forward to unknown futures. It was people like these who first came to Spring Garden, those Swedish pioneers who somehow made their way to this wilderness. It is tempting to idealize these pioneer men and women, tough as they were. We can let our imaginations turn them into models of some kind of manifest destiny—that somehow they boldly struck out in faith, heroically believing that God’s own hand would clear a pathway for them in this new land. I suppose it could’ve happened that way—but somehow, I think it might have been different than that.

Somehow, I think their experience of life was not all that different from ours. When we come to those profound moments of decision in life, most of us don’t even know we have been at an intersection. We come to these crossroads, trying to make the best choice with the information we have—or we go with our gut, hoping for the best. We say a prayer and trust the rest to God. It is often only in retrospect, as we look back on our lives that we begin to see the powerful hand of God guiding us, nudging us or pulling us forward. It is hard to know exactly what pulled these emigrants out of their old lives and into new ones. But we know for

certain that they began to see the hand of God's grace upon them as they made their way into their new world.

Today, we celebrate our 150th Anniversary at Spring Garden with a lot of Karl and Kristina in us—and it's not just the Swede part! It is in their ability to look with tenderness to what is behind them and their resolve to look and move forward that we share with Karl and Kristina. For me personally, it has been an amazing journey these last two years as we have prepared for this celebration. I have been living in the pioneer story of Spring Garden's forefathers and mothers. I'm not even Swede—and yet I feel as if I have come to know these pioneer ancestors as friends, as family. It's a wonderful thing!

In Luke's Gospel, Jesus reminds his disciples that they too, have been witnesses to a wonderful thing. They have witnessed the incredible unfolding of Jesus' life—his ministry and his teaching, his death and his rising from the dead. They have witnessed the transformation of people's lives by encounters with Jesus—and now they have been given the call to share the Good News about Jesus to every nation, beginning with Jerusalem. Now Jerusalem was the known place—hard as Jerusalem was on the followers of Jesus—think of the events around Jesus' crucifixion. But it is in this place that Jesus promises to clothe them with power from on high to give them the courage and the gifts to go out to all nations. In the first chapter of the book of Acts, also written by Luke, Luke picks up the story of Jesus preparing his followers for the coming of the Holy Spirit. Jesus tells his disciples that they will be his witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

There—did you hear it? Jesus is leading them on a journey from the known to the unknown. From Jerusalem, from the fishing nets of Galilee and the familiar homes and cooking fires of Judea, to the strange yet familiar Samaria, and finally to the ends of the earth. For Jesus, faith is ultimately a journey rather than a destination. And we know that those disciples did journey as witnesses to the ends of the earth—we are here today because of that movement ever outward.

I think back on those first pioneer families who staked a claim out here at Spring Garden—the Haggstroms, Edstroms and Wanbergs—they too, emigrated from familiar lands and ventured into the unknown. I imagine as they left Red Wing and followed buffalo trails west, there had to have been moments along the way where they wondered to themselves—“What on earth are we doing here? What was I thinking?” But they ventured on. And when they finally got settled, built their cabins and carved out a place in this wilderness, there must have been nights

or during winter blizzards that it felt to them that they had literally come to the ends of the earth.

But a funny thing happens when you go to the ends of the earth-- as you live, as you build relationships and community, as you make that place your home, what was once the ends of the earth becomes the center of your world. How do you know when a place has become the center of your world? Just try and leave it—like Karl and Kristina—like Peter and Andrew and John.

Just as the disciples of Jesus went out from Jerusalem carrying the faith to give birth to new communities of faith, and just as pioneers brought their faith in Jesus with them to the ends of the earth—but the center of our world, so now does Jesus ask us to reclaim the spirit of pioneers. Perhaps as pioneers turn into settlers, and settlements become centers of worlds, there is a tendency to let the pioneering spirit get lost in the comforts of the familiar. There are, after all, plenty of Swedes who stayed in Sweden and followers of Jesus who stayed in Judea. And that is fine. But when you are descended from pioneers, you are special stock. The Karls and Kristinas, the Peters and Andrews—they were risk takers. Something about their spirits was open to the leading of the Holy Spirit. And whether by nudge or pull or kick in the seat of the pants, these pioneers looked into the unknown and they went for it.

Today at Spring Garden, Jesus is calling us to that pioneering spirit again—to imagine ourselves not so much as settlers, but as people who break new ground for God. The world as we know it is mostly settled now—there are no real physical frontiers, no real ends of the earth anymore. But there are plenty of frontiers yet for pioneers willing to follow the Holy Spirit's leading. There is much about Christ to make known to our hurting world through acts of love and service and the word of the Gospel. There is a mission field in our youth and there is the frontier of the generations still to come. Like the disciples of Jesus and the pioneers of old, we have been entrusted with the wonders of faith—for we, too, have been witnesses of the living Jesus Christ.

We look now behind us with the tenderness of Kristina and we look forward also with the hope and expectation of Karl—and we go now clothed in the Holy Spirit's power. We are breaking new ground—we are finding the new ends of the earth. Let us pray then for an imagination bold enough, for courage strong enough and for a tenderness warm enough to see where Jesus is leading us. There is a horizon—and we can't yet see what is over it—but by the Grace of God, we know that it is there. Jesus is looking for some pioneers—oh it's a good land! Are you ready to go? Amen